

## With Blood and Soft Stitches by Hodgy (orphan\_account)

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**Summary:**

“What’s your name?” The man asks, eyes fixed forward and knuckles almost white from their tight grip on the steering wheel. Despite how tense his body looks, his voice is smooth and steady. He knows what he wants.

“Does that matter?” Billy replies, head tilted to the side. He’s almost *purring*, determined to not let this one get away. He’ll be damned if he let’s a rich one slip through his fingers, especially a rich one with this much potential. There’s something about the man beside Billy, something hiding, trapped beneath his crisp white shirt and perfectly styled hair. Billy’s determined to get it out. Determined to have him coming back for more.

# 1. Chapter 1

Sometimes Billy finds himself fixating on a tiny little speck of nothing; a chip of concrete on the pavement, the smudge of a fingerprint on an open door, a drop of liquid on the side of discarded coffee cup. He gets lost in his thoughts without meaning to. All it takes is a little bit of silence. A little bit of time alone. He's by himself tonight, Angel and Ty leaving him for a busier more populated part of the city.

Only those with a death wish sell their bodies alone. Especially in a big city like Atlanta. It's one thing that he's a hooker, it's another thing entirely that he's a male hooker. News of the gay plague has been sweeping the country for months. The god given cancer that's here to finally wipe every queer off the face of the earth. At this rate people like him are dropping like flies. Half condemned to a slow death by disease, the other half likely to get stabbed, bludgeoned to death or shot. Eleven this month alone have been murdered. Eleven like him. But everyone knows the numbers a lot higher than that. Those are the official police statistics – the bodies that have been found.

He'd been acting particularly shitty tonight; Snapping at anyone and everything. He'd told his friends to fuck off and they did. He can usually deal with Angel's incessant flirting and Ty's penchant for getting absolutely trashed on whiskey, but tonight, he wasn't feeling it. Ty was falling over the goddamn place in her clear platform heels like fucking Bambi, surely about to snap one or both of her ankles, and Angel wouldn't stop rolling her tongue around his earlobe and whispering about how she could "make him love pussy again".

His friends are complicated. They're all fucked up in their own special ways, all have their vices. All have some sort of tragedy in their childhood. Something that can be used against them. That's why they're family. They're all fuck ups, but they're fuck ups together.

Ty has her alcohol, Angel has her little brother. Gus has his pills. Lou, too fearless, too trusting, not near afraid enough of what lurks in the outskirts of the city a night. Always willing to give what little money he earned to any old bum that asked, as if he wasn't broke and

starving already.

Billy's lost in thought, thinking about Lou's poor excuse for a funeral. They'd had to make one for him themselves. Together, they'd scrounged up enough money for the coroner to have him cremated. Then they'd taken the bus out to sweetwater creek to scatter his ashes over the water. Ate fresh berries and drank pop by the riverside. Lou was just a kid. Fifteen years old. He was the bubbliest fifteen year old Billy had ever met, always tucking daisies into his shoelaces, never forgetting to give you a tight hug goodbye.

Lou's parent's spat in Gus' face when he'd knocked on their door to tell them that he was dead. Gus didn't deserve that. Lou didn't deserve that.

Lou reminded Billy of Max. Reminded Billy of why he could never see her again, of why he could never bring her into his world.

The cool chill of the Autumn breeze against the back of Billy's neck brings him back to reality. The low rumble of an engine in the distance. A cherry red Rolls Royce pulls up on Billy's corner, not a single speck of dirt marring the perfect paint job.

*Old and Rich, no doubt* Billy thinks to himself, cautiously optimistic. They're usually the best clients. They pay a lot and don't ask for much. It can go one of two ways. Either they come in under sixty seconds at the sight of Billy's bare chest, or he has to spend an hour lapping at a flaccid cock until the old bastard gets so embarrassed that he leaves - usually giving up a couple hundred for Billy's trouble.

Billy undoes the last of his buttons, combs a hand through his hair, and sidles up to the driver side window, tapping on the glass with his free hand. Billy can see the faint silhouette of someone on the other side. He's expecting the window to roll down, for the person to inquire about price, time, whether or not they can fuck him bareback, if he wants to watch or be watched. The usual rundown before he picks up a new client.

Instead, the passenger side door pops open. It's a good sign. Means he doesn't have a budget. Billy grins at the thought of a brand new pouch of tobacco and a hot meal. Maybe he can get Gus a little more

weed. The good shit from Cisco on the docks.

Daydreaming about what he's going to buy later that night, Billy saunters over to the open car door and ducks in, fully expecting a pensioner to greet him with their dick already hanging out of their tan chinos.

He's surprised when he sees the polar opposite. It's a man. Young. Early twenties probably. Thick brown hair. He still looks rich despite looking like he's just graduated high school. There's an expensive looking watch fastened around his wrist and a gold band on his ring finger. Ah. Married.

The man turns the key and the Rolls Royce rumbles to life, pulling out into the near dead city street.

"What's your name?" The man asks, eyes fixed forward and knuckles almost white from their tight grip on the steering wheel. Despite how tense his body looks, his voice is smooth and steady. He knows what he wants.

"Does that matter?" Billy replies, head tilted to the side. He's almost *purring*, determined to not let this one get away. He'll be damned if he let's a rich one slip through his fingers, especially a rich one with this much potential. There's something about the man beside Billy, something hiding, trapped beneath his crisp white shirt and perfectly styled hair. Billy's determined to get it out. Determined to have him coming back for more.

"I think so." The man says. He's a little more hesitant this time. But he presses on regardless. "I want to know. What am I supposed to call you?"

"What's your name, pretty boy?" Billy leans forward as he says it, close enough to smell the crisp, clean scent of the man's clothes. He smells nice. Fresh and summery, like a spring breeze. Not doused in cheap cologne like Billy's regulars.

"That's... nevermind." The man seems to get the point. He still hasn't turned to look at Billy, despite the latter inching closer by the second.

Billy doesn't say anything. The car is eerily silent, the only sounds either can hear being each others breathing. The man seems to be thinking the same thing, and he suddenly jerks a hand away from the steering wheel to fiddle with the dials on the radio. Some sort of soft rock ballad starts playing through the upscale speaker system. *The Police*, Billy thinks. *What a fucking yuppie.*

Billy reaches a tentative hand over, and gently sets it down on the mans' thigh. Billy watches him for any sign of discomfort, any trace of anger at the touch. Still nothing. Just a deep inhale.

It takes a few more minutes until they reach their destination. It's only a couple of blocks away from Billy's regular corner, just a bit more out of the way. It makes sense that the guy doesn't want to risk being seen. He parks the car, paying a little too much attention to how neatly he does it considering that the lot they're in is empty. Void of foot traffic and vehicles.

The man finally turns to look at Billy, eyebrows furrowed and gaze downcast. After a beat, he looks up. Billy can see the man is looking over his features. Pleased that he finally has a clear view, Billy does the same. The man is handsome. A square jaw, nice lips, strong eyebrows, freckles. Billy's type.

"Can I kiss you?" The man asks, sounding like he's about to stumble over his own words.

He looks as nervous as he sounds now, and Billy almost laughs at the question. In the few years he's been doing this he doesn't think anyone's ever actually asked him first. It's not rare for someone to want to kiss him. He knows how attractive people find him. There's just not usually any talking bar how much money this is going to cost – certainly no requests for consent. He's a warm body to use as desired. Convenient and easy. It's part of the job description.

Billy doesn't answer. Rather, he squeezes the man's thigh, eyes half lidded as he leans in and puts on his best fuck me smirk.

It doesn't take long for the man to bridge the gap between them. Billy can feel warm hands cup his jaw, then they're on his shoulders, his sides. It becomes a blur of teeth and tongues, and it's easy to forget

just how skittish the man had been only a few minutes ago; he's licking into Billy's mouth like this is the most erotic experience of his life, delicate fingers weaving into Billy's curls and tugging gently at the roots. Billy can't help but shiver when perfectly trimmed nails drag across his scalp and flit over the nape of his neck, letting himself enjoy this for once despite the ill feeling that settled behind his belly button as soon as he got in the car. He doubts he'll ever get rid of that, though. Being disgusted with himself is just part of Billy's regular work day.

Once he's confident the man isn't going to try beating his face in, he reaches over to the front of his trousers, expertly getting the button and fly open in a matter of seconds. He can feel the effect he's already having on the man, the evidence pressing up hard into his palm, so he's genuinely surprised when the man unexpectedly breaks their kiss and loops his fingers around Billy's wrist, breathing heavily into the the air between them.

"No, I don't want that. Listen, I'm -- I don't want you to do something you don't want to do." The man chokes out. His hand is shaking.

Billy just stares at him, a little incredulous.

"I'm a rent boy, pal. I'll do whatever you want me to do, and I'll do it with a smile on my face as long as I'm getting paid when we're done. You want me to suck you off? A handjob? I'll let you fuck me if you take me some place nice. I can fuck you. Anything you want. It's not about what I want. I want whatever you want, understand?"

The man's lips are slick with spit. He's a little wild eyed, and his collarbone is glistening with sweat, shirt open from when Billy had managed to get a few of the buttons open amidst their tryst. He closes his eyes, and after what seems like an eternity of silence, he opens them again, suddenly a vision of composure. He fixes his shirt, sweeps his hair back into place and pulls out his wallet, picking out four crisp hundred dollar bills and offering them to Billy, who takes them without hesitation and tucks them into the waistband of his jeans.

The grin Billy puts on is wicked, the tip of his tongue skimming back and forth over his teeth, chin tilted back. Now they're getting

somewhere.

“Alright. What exactly am I going to have to do for this? Am I going to bleed tonight? ‘Cause I’m down for it, handsome.”

The man turns to look at him, scanning over Billy’s features once again.

“Your earring.” he says simply. “It suits you.”

And with that he’s in Billy’s space again, breath hot on his neck, warmth radiating off of his body and onto Billy’s, only to lean right over his shoulder and push open the passenger side door, cold midnight air rushing in.

“You can go.”

Billy looks pointedly at the man with a look he’s sure comes across as thoroughly offended.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Go. Keep the money. I don’t need it.”

“I’m in your vehicle ready and entirely willing and you’re... telling me to leave?”

The man’s gaze is still dancing over Billy’s face and body, almost as though he’s trying to take it in. He looks mournful, almost. Like when you have to throw out a once treasured memento for space on the shelf. It’s probably reminiscent of what’s going on in the guy’s head, Billy considers. He’s tossing Billy aside like used trash because his mind doesn’t have room to rationalize the attraction.

Billy glances down at the shiny band around the man’s finger and realizes that yeah, maybe he should give this one up, maybe this one isn’t ready yet.

He’ll live out his life with his wife in his fancy ass house, raise some rich pompous kids, buy a specialty dog from a breeder worth more than everything Billy will ever own, and maybe in 50 years he’ll find himself on this street corner once again, looking for something his wife can’t give him. Something that all of the girls thirty years his

junior that he's probably already cheated on her with can't give him either.

Whatever. Billy doesn't care anyway. He's got his money and as far as he's concerned that's where this ends. So he shrugs, tucks his shirt back into his jeans, and leans over to press a kiss to the man's parted mouth.

"For your time. And money."

And with that, he steps out of the car, grin stretching across his lips as he slides his fingers under his waist band and pulls out his cash. The man doesn't hesitate to start the car up and pull out of the lot. Billy flips him off as he leaves, shouts out the loudest "Fuck you!" he can muster as the tail lights turn a corner and disappear behind a building.

Billy's pretty close to home. He can easily walk to rest of the way. But first, he has a few stops to make.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

so that was that? let me know what you think if you'd like! i already have most of chapter two written so please let me know if that's something you'd be interested in or if you'd like for me to kill this with fire. all comments and critiques are welcomed and appreciated.



## 2. Chapter 2

### Summary for the Chapter:

Billy spends up. Gus listens to Glenn Campbell.

Gus is the most ridiculous person Billy has ever met. Certainly the most ridiculous person he's ever considered a friend. He's tall and lanky, with a litany of tattoos scattered all the way down his body; from above his eyebrows to his ankles. Hair a shock of pink and botched bottle blonde; he's the walking, talking embodiment of a suburban housewife's nightmare.

Despite looking like he's just walked out of a circus; Gus, even at his worst comedown, wouldn't hurt a fly. When Billy last found himself in trouble, and he'd reluctantly nabbed a polished gold and sapphire band out of Gus' dresser as a last ditch effort to pay back a debt he'd owed (he'd honestly thought Gus had snatched it from some old rich lady in midtown), all Gus had done was sit him down, hold his hands, and explain to Billy through tears that "That was my Old Lady's ring, man, not cool. Not cool at all."

He didn't even kick Billy off the couch. Just left him there in his thoughts and scuffled off into his room to cry some more. Billy got the ring back eventually, but he still hasn't forgiven himself for what he did. You don't fuck with a man's mom.

Billy pushes the door of his friends apartment open with his hip, arms full and stacked all the way up to his chin with alcohol and hot food from their favorite diner on Panola Road.

"Oh *fuck* yeah, Billy. That's what I'm talking about. Did'ja reel in a big fish tonight?"

Gus' thick southern drawl is as endearing as ever. He's splayed out over the sofa, pipe in one hand and lighter in the other, grinning from ear to ear.

A Glen Campbell record is spinning away in the corner, entirely too loud and obnoxious for Billy's taste. He says just as much to Gus,

meeting his friend's already blood shot eyes with a glare.

"Aren't you meant to be a punk or something? Has this whole get up been for show the entire time I've known you? Because you really do listen to some country bumpkin crap."

"What can I say, brother." Gus shoots back, blowing out a lung full of smoke. "Dolly Partons' ass speaks to me. It's a spiritual thing."

Billy just grunts, kicking the door shut behind him.

"Jesus H. Christ, open a window or something dude. It reeks in here."

After making his way into the kitchen, Billy unloads his haul on the table, organizing the white styrofoam containers into two neat rows.

"Alright we got waffles, we got pancakes, we got pizza, we got eggs. Chow down while you can because I don't think I'm gonna be getting this lucky again for at least another six months."

Gus is behind him in seconds, planting a wet kiss to Billy's cheek.

"I love you. I love you so, so very much, my *William*. My Rock. My Angel. My mornin' star—"

"Yeah, alright, alright. Dig in. I've already eaten so take as much as you want."

Billy pats Gus' belly on his way back to the living room. He settles down in Gus' ratty old recliner and pulls out the last two of his remaining Benjamins, sliding them under the ashtray on the coffee table.

"Yo." Billy shouts out, getting a syrupy "Yes, my love." back from the kitchen in return.

"There's some cash for you on the table, alright."

A cry of protest echoes out at him as Gus steps into the living room, mouth already full and plate piled high with fatty breakfast foods.

"No, don't argue. I've been here for months. This is the least I can do.

I'll get you more, I swear. Just don't blow it all on pills, alright? That shit makes you stupid."

Gus swallows his food and drops back down onto the couch, setting his plate down on the table in front of him. His eyes are narrowed, and Billy can hear a little clink of metal as he pulls his lip ring between his teeth.

"You know I don't fuck around with that stuff anymore, man. I told you that."

Billy just nods in acknowledgement, staring pointedly at his shoes. This isn't a subject they breach often, and when they do, it's never pleasant. Awkward silence fills the air for a couple of minutes, both boys not quite knowing what to say.

Finally, Gus shrugs and plasters his trademark grin back across his face.

"About this client. I don't see any new bruises on 'ya. You ain't bleedin'. He or she didn't slap you around and you don't look any more mentally scarred than usual so, how the fuck did you manage to squeeze this much cash out of 'em? Ah, Rich old guy, huh? You dog, William. We've gotta respect our elders, not con 'em out of their hard earned golfing holiday funds. How saggy were his balls? Did ya even see 'em? Or was he one of them old fuckers that pay to suck cock? I love those guys, if you close your eyes and they have their fake teeth in, you almost don't notice they were prob'ly sweepin' chim-a-neys at the turn of the last century." Gus is back to talking a hundred words per minute, already shoveling forkfuls of syrup coated waffle into his mouth.

"Actually, no." Billy says, fishing a cigarette out of his pocket. "He was... young. And... Kind of hot? In that youthful, powerful, businessman kind of way."

Gus' eyes widen in surprise. It's rare for them to get rich clients to begin with, and hooking anyone above a two on the attractiveness scale is rarer, still. But both at the same time? Near on impossible.

"I think he was married. He had a ring on. Poor bitch probably

though he was out having work drinks or some bullshit with his *colleagues*.” Billy continues, enunciating the last word with a lilt in his voice. He can’t help but laugh a little, tossing his head back to stare at the ceiling. “All I had to do was make out with him a little and he gave me almost half a grand. It only took ten fucking minutes. I got out of his fancy fucking car and I didn’t even have to brush myself off. The rich motherfucker probably gets the damn thing cleaned every second day.”

“What kind of car was it” Gus says. Billy can hear in his voice that he’s impressed.

“Rolls.” Billy replies, taking a drag of his newly lit cigarette.

“You’re shittin’ me. He gave you this much cash up front to suck face? You lucky motherfucker. When did you become king of frenchin’? I told’ja it’s been too long since we last hooked up. I’m the best you’ve ever had and you know it, baby.”

Billy hums, unfazed by Gus’ comment and still a little dazed from the night he’s had. The memory of the man’s delicate fingers weaving their way into his hair weighing on the back of his mind.

*Your earring. It suits you.*

Billy doubts he’ll ever see the man again. Guys like that usually resist their urges 364 days out of the year and only crack on the rarest occasion. He almost laughs at the thought. The man was probably already at home confessing his sins to his wife. Probably crying at her feet like a fucking pussy.

Oh well, Billy thinks, he’s going to eat like a king tonight, and tomorrow, well, there’s plenty more depressed closeted queers in the sea.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

soooo i love gus and would probably marry his hillbilly ass. hope you enjoyed! thanks for your support etc. catch me on my poor excuse for a blog @berebone. special thanks to noel for being a bomb

ass person and encouraging me to keep writing this  
train wreck! love u all. next chapter will be longer.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Summary for the Chapter:

Billy thinks too much. They get pancakes.

#### Notes for the Chapter:

this is unedited but it's midnight and i wanna post this before i knock out. thank you for all your beautiful comments as always.

It's weeks, bordering on a month, before Billy sees the man again.

The wind still hasn't lost its chill despite summer supposedly starting a fortnight ago, and Billy is currently donning one of his old leather jackets to keep the cold out. He can't afford to be off work again for a while, and though customers usually have never cared if their hired help comes with a runny nose or a sore throat — all that usually does is turn them on more — the whole *HIV* thing (Billy has only just learnt its formal name) has put a stop to that entirely. Client's usually don't like to be reminded of it.

It's a slow night. He and Gus have retreated back to their usual spot after an evening of wandering here, there, and everywhere trying to find someone, anyone really, to pick them up. It's been raining, and the air has that musty, damp smell to it. It makes a nice change to the usual aura of fetid garbage and rotting fruit that usually lingers there at least.

Billy turns the collar of his jacket up against the cold, before digging his fists as far into his pockets as he can manage. Yeah, he fucking hates this.

"There's plenty room in here, sugar." Gus suggests with an over-the-top wink, opening up his gaudy mustard yellow fur coat to make room for Billy, who begrudgingly shuffles over without argument. He's enveloped in warmth within seconds, and he sighs as he lets his body relax against Gus'.

"Jesus, you're shiverin'." Gus says into Billy's hair. His voice is a little muffled, but Billy can still make out the concern in his tone.

"Says the one with negative five percent body fat." Billy grumbles with a pinch to Gus' side. "Who the fuck wears no shirt on a night like this? You looking to get pneumonia?"

"It's *fashion*, doll. Some people didn't grow up surfin' and sunbathin' all day every day. Californian's, I swear, y'all wouldn't know the difference between a brisk evenin' out here and the dawn of a new damn ice age. If you need'ta we can go home. It's a quiet night anyway."

Billy pulls Gus' coat tighter around their bodies and tells him no; that Billy will go crazy if he's forced to swallow down stale leftovers and tap water for the fourth night in a row.

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They stay out for a few more hours, not a single taker the entire time. The rain starts back up again, and Billy almost says fuck it, almost takes up Gus' offer -- a night off work is really tempting right now. But almost as if by fate, as soon as he opens his mouth to verbalize the thought, a car speeds down the street, screeching to a halt right in front of the two men. The paint-job is dotted with fat rain drops, and it somehow looks even shinier than last time Billy saw it; maraschino red bouncing back onto the pavement from the street lights above.

"Ho-ly shit. Is that the guy?"

Gus hops from foot to foot, clearly excited at the idea of a full belly tonight. Billy perks up, too. "Fuck, I think it is."

Billy takes a deep breath and plucks their last cigarette out from behind Gus' ear, putting the filter end between his lips.

"Go get 'em, Tiger." Gus whispers into his ear with a sharp slap to his ass. "I'm thinkin' Mexican tonight."

The door of the Rolls pops open as soon as he steps off the curb. He hops in, and the man is already leaning over to greet him, flicking

open a zippo with his thumb and lighting Billy's cigarette.

"Who's that?" The man asks, one eyebrow raised. He's referencing Gus, who's clearly visible through the tinted windows, bare chest, goofy grin and all. Billy takes a deep drag of his cigarette, muscles relaxing as nicotine-laced smoke fills his lungs. He holds it there for a few seconds before breathing it out through his nose, tongue peeking out to wet his lips.

"Why? You looking for a threesome?"

The man shakes his head. He's laughing, but it sounds awkward, tight almost. Like it's something he'd never think to ask, and that he's surprised at how much the idea resonates with him. Billy holds out his smoke, and the man takes it, pulling deeply on the filter.

"My name's Steve." The man, *Steve*, says, once he's passed the cigarette back. It catches Billy off guard, but he's not necessarily surprised by it. For people in Steve's position, keeping yourself anonymous is sometimes outranked by the visceral *need* to hear your own name moaned back at you during sex.

"Well then, Steve. I'm glad you came back to see me. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, you're just so goddamn *pretty*."

Billy's voice is smooth and clear despite it being bullshit. He's barely thought about Steve at all since their last encounter, past off hand comments from Gus whenever their power shuts out or their water stops running. *You expecting a visit from Mr. Corporate any time soon? Tell him I'll do whatever the hell he wants to me for a hot shower. Imma lose my reputation smellin' like dried up old man come all the damn time.*

"I know you're lying." Steve breathes out after a beat. There's the trace of a blush high on his cheeks though, and the sentence comes out a little too fast. Billy's clearly having some type of effect on him, and that's all that really matters. He stubs the cigarette out in the dash ashtray so that he can set his hand down on Steve's forearm.

"Am I? If I was lying I wouldn't be able to tell you in vivid detail just how much I missed you. Your mouth, I thought of it every night. All alone. Just me and my--"



“Stop.”

Steve cuts him off. He’s chewing down harshly on his lip, and his cheeks are flushed even darker. Billy watches his Adams apple bob as he swallows thickly. He’s right where Billy wants him.

*Almost* . Billy slides his hand up, over Steve’s bicep, skimming over his shoulder, and dances his fingertips across Steve’s throat.

“You really want me to?” Billy asks, dragging his nails over Steve’s jawline and down to his chin.

“Listen, I’m...” Steve starts, only to pause with a hitched breath as Billy cups his jaw with an open palm. “...I’m not here for that.”

This is going to be harder than Billy had originally thought. He can tell that Steve’s on the edge though, one toe off the metaphorical cliff and ready to plunge down to his fate. All it’s going to take is a little *push*.

“Then what are you here for?”

Billy cocks his head to the side. Steve’s looking at him, eye’s drawn to the cross dangling from Billy’s ear, lips parted and brows furrowed. It looks like he’s trying to say something but he can’t quite get it out, can’t quite find the words.

Billy’s going to have to pull it out of Steve himself.

And then he’s craning his neck to mouth at Steve’s neck, scattering kisses down to the open collar of his shirt, pressing his tongue flat against the dip of his exposed collarbone. There are nails digging into Billy’s shoulders, labored breathing in his ear, and suddenly Steve is pushing him away again, just like last time.

“The fuck is with you, dude?” Billy grits out, not even trying to hide the annoyance in his voice. “Who in their right mind pick’ up a hooker and then doesn’t want to get fucked? You have issues, man, I can’t fucking believe this.”

Steve’s staring at him, a little wide eyed.

“Why are you looking at me all confused like that? I’m the one who should be confused here, are you gonna let me do my job or are you gonna pussy out again because I’m not just going to sit here all night wasting my damn time when I could be doing something else.”

“I’ve got money if you just -- just bear with me. Please.”

They’re both clearly frustrated, and Billy is surprised he didn’t just get kicked to the curb from that outburst. He folds his arms across his chest and leans back against the cream upholstery.

“Whatever, dude. Work your shit out. I’ll be here.”

Out of the corner of Billy’s eye he can see Steve fiddling with the keys. They jingle as they’re pushed back into the ignition, and within seconds the vehicle roars back to life. Billy hazards a glance over Steve’s shoulder as they pull out onto the road. Gus is resting his elbows on the open window sill of a dark Saab, fur coat pushed down his arms so that his shoulders are exposed. At least he’s set for the night.

They drive for a what feels like an hour, but it’s probably closer to half that. It’s silent except for Bob Dylan’s soft crooning over the speakers. Steve must have a tape in, Billy thinks. At least it’s not the fucking Police. Eventually, once they’ve hit midtown, and the lights around them brighten tenfold from the towering skyscrapers of the inner city, Steve turns to look at him.

“Are you hungry?”

He sounds a lot calmer than before. It reminds Billy of the last time he got kicked out of Steve’s car. Less authoritarian this time, though. Less like he’s scolding a child and more like he’s talking to a friend. It’s strange.

“Sure.”

It’s all Billy can really say. He just wants to get this over with and find out what Steve wants. Wants to know why he’s been picked up twice and yet, for the lack of a better term, has been rejected, both times.

Steve parks up beside what looks to be some kind of 24 hour diner. They wordlessly unbuckle their seatbelts and get out. Steve even pushes the door open for him once they've made their way over to the entrance. Billy's immediately greeted with the gaudiest, most stereotypical 50's scene he thinks he's ever seen. Hot pink neon, black and white checkered flooring, a jukebox. It's all there. Steve shrugs at him when he sees the mild look disgust on Billy's face.

Billy makes a beeline for a booth in the most isolated corner, far away from the few truckers and tweakers dotted around near the bar.

A busty waitress struts over to their table, heels clicking against the tile, chest and legs on deliberate display. A large balding man behind the bar is leering at her from behind a newspaper, forehead slick with sweat and grease. His name tag reads *Manager* in bold black lettering. Yeah. Billy's almost one hundred percent certain she didn't sew her own hem that short.

"Coffee, hons'?"

Her gum pops, and she smiles prettily at them, but her mascara-framed eyes are glazed over and distant. despite her upbeat demeanor. Just another night of pretending not to notice men ogling her ass when they think she's not looking, huh? Billy knows how she feels.

"Please." Steve nods "We'll be ready to order soon."

"Sure, darlin'."

As soon as she's out of earshot, Steve leans over the table to look at the menu. "Do you know what you want yet?" He says, so casually that Billy guffaws, completely taken aback.

"You fuckin' *crazy* ?" Billy hisses "What are we doing here?"

"We're eating. Now choose something. Or more than one thing. Get whatever you want."

"We're--" Billy laughs, a little manic. "We're eating? The fuck do you think I am, Pretty Woman? Listen, *Steve* . I'm not an escort. That's not my deal. Any other slut in this city will gladly get paid to go out on

prissy little dates with you, but that's not my thing. I don't know who pointed you in my direction but if you're looking for someone to hang on your arm, you'd best stop looking in the fucking slums. You're going to get yourself robbed or killed if you keep showing up in that waste of money of yours without an actual tangible offer on the table."

Steve looks like he's about to say something back, lips parting, but before he can, their waitress returns with a full jug of coffee in hand. Steve's mouth snaps shut.

"Y'all ready to order yet?" She says with suggestive cadence, bending down to pour hot liquid into their mugs, giving both men a clear view of her cleavage. Billy looks away, catching the eye of the Manager, who's scowling at the the girls' back. Somehow, the thought of her potentially getting in trouble if he decides to cause a scene makes him slump back down into his seat, resigned.

Billy's known men like this one before. The poor girl will get blamed in a instant if Billy walks out of here without paying for a full meal. He'll probably threaten her job, give her a *second chance* if he can get a flash of her tits. Billy's stomach turns at the thought.

"Yeah, uh..." He glances down at the menu. "Blueberry pancakes, please. Side of bacon if you've got it."

"Coming right up, hon'. And for you, handsome?" She turns to Steve with a flourish, who's blatantly staring at Billy like he's grown an extra limb. "Um." He coughs, averting his gaze to take a quiet sip of coffee, mumbling out a dampened "Same" into his cup.

"Okay." Billy says once the waitress has left again, stretching both arms out over the back of his booth. "You're gonna buy me this meal, get me the same order again for takeout, and in return: I'm going to listen to you talk. You're going to tell me exactly what you want from me before I've finished this plate and then I'm out of here."

Steve leans back into his seat, eyes narrowed at Billy, lips pressed together in contemplation.

"Hurry the fuck up then, I haven't got all goddamn night." Billy says

just loud enough for the other to hear him, already itching to leave.

Steve doesn't say anything. Instead, he reaches into his blazer pocket and pulls out a small black box, sliding it across the table it toward Billy, expectant.

Billy, in return, barks out a laugh.

"That for me? We gettin' fuckin' hitched now or what?"

Steve shakes his head, unfazed by the snide comment. "Open it."

Billy sighs, he'll bite.

The box is smooth in Billy's hand, expensive. It has a little gold hinge on one side, and the embossed logo of what he's sure is some kind of high street boutique emblazoned across the faux leather. It makes a satisfying *click* as he pops it open.

Inside, laying on a bed of red felt, lays a single earring. It's silver, fashioned into the shape of a feather. Billy can already see what it will look like dangling from his ear.

Carefully, he extracts the earring from the box, lifting it up in front of his nose and turning it between his thumb and forefinger to get a better look. He doubts he's ever owned anything this expensive. It's beautiful.

"It's yours, if you want it." Steve says from across their booth, eye's sparkling with optimism.

"You can't actually be serious right now."

Billy's never seen someone's expression change so quickly in his life. The aforementioned sparkle disappears from Steve's eyes, replaced with a look of raw disappointment.

"You don't like it?" Steve questions, frowning, so obviously confused at what's probably his first rejection that he can't hide the sadness in his voice.

"Woah there. Slow your roll, Princess. Lay off on the sad puppy dog

eyes. It's not that I don't like it, per say, it's more that I don't know why you're giving this to me. Why *are* you giving this to me?"

Billy watches Steve's expression change again, back to cautious optimism.

"I just. I thought of you when I saw it, I guess. I was out today with my um, with my *friend* and I spotted it in a window display. You can keep it. Even if you don't ever want to see me again. It's yours." Steve can no doubt see the bewildered look on Billy's his face, because he's suddenly lifting his hands up in the air in mock surrender "I'm under no illusion here; I know what this is to you. I do. You don't need to tell me again. Listen, I just want to-- I don't know, take you out. Wine you and dine you, I guess. And before you say it, I don't want *any other slut*, as you so graciously put it. I want it to be you. Speaking of, don't call yourself that word. What you do, it's-- I respect it."

Billy can feel his position wavering. This isn't usually his thing, but he'd be stupid to turn it down. He'd be an absolute idiot to say no to this. He can already hear Gus nagging at him about what could have been *if he'd just not been such a selfish, proud jackass*. Billy owes Gus one. Owes Gus a lot more than one.

Billy heaves a deep sigh and settles with an "I'll think about it" just as their waitress returns with their food, piping hot and smelling of fresh blueberries and sugar.

They eat in relative silence. It's not awkward or uncomfortable. Billy's just not too sure about what to say . Steve doesn't seem to mind though; he appears quite content to enjoy his food and smile at Billy across the table every so often. It's kind of weird, but Billy would be lying if he didn't find it the tiniest bit endearing. He almost scoffs at himself when he realizes what he's thinking about. He doesn't dwell on it. Stream of consciousness and all that, right? The pretty gift has just got him dazzled. Shiny things have always been his weakness.

Billy thinks back to Lou. Thinks about a conversation they had one night last January, a night a lot colder than this one. Their bare feet were dangling over the side of an unpopulated overpass on the outskirts of town, socks and shoes abandoned somewhere fifty feet

below.

*Promise me you're gonna get out before it's too late. Get a proper job... a house with the girls and uncle Gus. If you start showering on a regular basis you might even get yourself a boyfriend.*

*Shut the hell up, kid, before I shut you up myself.*

*You know you're not that intimidating, right?*

*Another word and I 'aint buying you your damn pretzel on the walk back.*

*Bill, promise.*

*Fuck, fine. Fine. Jeez, here I am, thinking I'm the adult here or somethin'. When was your eighteenth birthday, again? I don't recall getting an invite.*

*You're still not saying the words 'I promise'. You should know by now that I'm not going to shut up until you do.*

*Holy shit you're pushy. I promise. You happy? Can we go now? I'm not a big fan of the old 'losing a toe to frostbite' thing.*

Billy thinks about the bright, sunbeam of a smile that Lou had directed toward him at that. Thinks about how a warm hand had grabbed his and pulled him up off the concrete. Thinks about the tight hug Lou gave him when they said their goodbyes.

He looks up at Steve. Takes in his features like he'd done the first night they'd met. Skims his eyes down Steve's straight nose, over the dip of his cupid's bow, looks at his plush mouth and the curve of his jaw and the flecks of gold in his iris'.

Billy can think of a hundred other worse things to do than getting present's from a pretty attractive guy who's not asking for much in return.

It looks like he's going to fulfill his promise to Lou after all.

